



Case studies to enhance online student evaluation: University of Western Australia – A journey towards greater engagement through closing-the-loop

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Case studies to enhance student evaluation

2015 University of Western Australia:

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Contents

04 Acknowledgements

05 Abstract

05 Introduction

06 Closing the loop

07 Strategies

08 Conclusion

08 References

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Abstract

Feedback from students has shown time and again to be useful indicators of what is happening in the teaching and learning environments. Such feedback from students, pivot around the actions that are taken. This implementation of actions expresses to students that their voice is being heard in higher education institutions. To achieve such utility of feedback provided by student, it is essential to 'close the loop' and constitutes; the collection of qualitative and quantitative feedback from all cohorts of students; triangulating the data from various sources to identify areas of good practice and areas needing improvement; communicating the results and actions of the feedback with students and staff; implementing improvements in consultation with stakeholders; and monitoring the impact of actions in future student survey results. Such a framework would constitute effective quality assurances of the student feedback systems in higher education institutions.

Introduction

The research literature articulates well the pivotal role students play in university management by providing feedback on what they see as most important and their satisfaction to the teaching and learning environments (eg., Bennett & Nair, 2010; Harvey et.al. 1997). Clearly supporting the literature is the reality where the student experience in general is on the radar of institutions in terms of making the teaching and learning experience the best it can be for their students. Supporting this is the research which demonstrates that student perceptions are not only reliable but as well valid indicators of the quality of the courses and programs. In addition, there is clear evidence that feedback from students' evaluations can lead to improved teaching effectiveness thus enhancing the quality of the educational environment. The research literature illustrates the value add of student feedback as follows (Bennett & Nair, 2010; Shah & Nair, 2012):

- **Diagnostic feedback to departments, schools and faculties about the teaching and learning taking place which in turn aids in the development and improvement of teaching;**
- **Critical research data that aid in the further design and improvements to the curriculum and teaching activities;**
- **A measure of effectiveness of the learning and teaching environments; and**
- **A source of useful information for current and potential students in the selection of units and courses and possibly the institution.**



Closing the loop

The term 'closing the loop' is often used within the corridors of higher education to encompass the actions relating to reporting back to students the changes that are being considered or has taken place as a result of them providing feedback via surveys or other forums. Simply put acknowledging that participants have a right to know what is being done as a result of their feedback.

Supporting this notion of closing the loop is the work of Harvey et al (1997). In this work the researchers suggest that "feedback is not only a courtesy to those who have taken time to respond but it is also essential to demonstrate that the process both identifies areas of student concern and does something about them". To be effective Harvey (2011) suggests a number of steps. These include;

- **Institutions identifying and delegating responsibility for actions;**
- **Encouraging the ownership of the action plans;**
- **Ensuring accountability is inbuilt for the actions to be taken;**
- **A communication process where the outcomes of the feedback are reported back to students and**
- **The commitment of appropriate resources so that the changes can be actioned.**

In addition to the elements outlined by Harvey (2011), two other critical factors play an important part for an effective implementation of the closing of the loop phase; monitoring of the actions taken, and resourcing the effective implementation of the agreed actions/improvements.

An argument that been voiced by many academics is that there are too many surveys in the system and 'survey fatigue' is the root cause for low responses. Though this seems like a sound argument, the research literature suggests that the primary reason for the reluctance of participants to provide feedback is that there is little evidence that action has been taken in response to their feedback (e.g. Harvey, 2003; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008; Powney and Hall 1998; Leckey and Neill 2001). Leckey and Neill's (2001) work supports this notion that actions taken are integral to "closing the loop" otherwise students tend to be sceptical and unwilling to participate.

In addition, Harvey (2003) argues that not only must there be action taken based on student views but there is a need for the students to be convinced that change has occurred.

Bennett and Nair (2010) go further by suggesting that for the loop to be effective students need to be informed about the purpose and the subsequent use of evaluations in the quality cycle.

Supporting the notion that 'closing the loop' is integral to an effective quality system is illustrated by a number of researchers demonstrating the positive effect of when feedback loops are covered (Watson, 2003; Symons, 2006). Watson (2006) for instance shows how longitudinal satisfaction trends have improved when a transparent approach is adopted by an institution. The work of Powney and Hall (1998) strongly suggests that institutions where staff are not concerned about student opinion, student apathy towards the completion of feedback surveys is more apparent. They go on to argue that as a result of such complacency students are less likely to take the time and effort to complete questionnaires if they feel that it is simply a meaningless and a ritual that the institution goes through to tick the appropriate boxes in their quality process.

In general there is agreement in the research literature that closing of the loop phase has been the neglected component of the feedback loop and is the most challenging step in the evaluation cycle (Harvey 2011; Powney & Hall, 1998; Watson, 2003). University audits have also have highlighted this issue of the lack of follow through by universities in failing to act on the data they have collected (Nair & Shah, 2011).



Strategies

The need to 'close the loop' has been identified by a number of researchers resulting in institutions initiating changes to address this matter (Kek, Hunt, & Sankey, 2009). Organisations in general would have to communicate the outcomes of surveys or feedback back to their stakeholders. Table one outlines some strategies that could be utilised to get back to stakeholders.

Table one: Strategies to 'close the loop'

Strategy	Advantage		Disadvantage
In class communication	Verbal report to class by teacher	Effective at the unit/subject level No cost and easy to do	Uses class time
	Written report to class by teacher		Teacher time to summarise response
	Verbal report to class by a student representative		Uses class time All students may not be present Student representative may not be able to answer queries
	Include in unit/subject outlines	Easy and quick Students can easily refer to the information	Benefits only incoming students
Electronic Communication	General email to all students and staff	Easy and quick Inexpensive and efficient	Might not reach students who have graduated
	Uploading on the Learning Management System		Effective if LMS is frequently used in class Will not reach students who have completed the unit or graduated
	World Wide Web including applicable Facebook and Twitter sites	Can be developed to varying degrees of sophistication Easy accessibility to current students Useful for multi-site delivery situation	May involve web development costs May need to password protect access
	Online handbooks for perspective students	Easily available for future students	Some areas may not have information ready
	What's New section on university home page or portal	Easily accessible Accessible to the total student population	
	Texting students on their mobile/cell phones with links	Fast, efficient and low cost	Privacy issues Cost issues for student to access site to review outcome
Radio Broadcast	Advertise outcome on student run radio station on campus	Reaches many students Possibly no expense	
Posters/Flyers/ Newsletters	Advertise around department or mail or email directly to students	Effective at the course level	Will involve production and design cost Time consuming and delay in getting fast response to participants

Conclusion

It has been argued by a number of researchers that the need to 'close the loop' is imperative to student evaluation (Kek, Hunt, & Sankey, 2009). A number of strategies were highlighted ranging from in-class verbal reports from educators to advertising the results of student evaluation through flyers and newsletters. Such strategies as these, signify to students that their feedback is valued and used as a mean to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

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